Ethical question of the month — November 2001

What is the relationship between animal productivity and animal welfare?

Question de déontologie du mois — novembre 2001

Quel lien existe-t-il entre la productivité de l'élevage et le bien-être des animaux?

An ethicist's commentary on equating productivity and welfare

Historically, there is a close connection between productivity and welfare. For most of human history (in fact, for all but the past 50 years), agriculture has been rooted in animal husbandry. Husbandry meant, in essence, care; the word comes from the Old Norse *hus/bond,* "bonded to the household," a suitable locution epitomizing the symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship between humans and domestic animals that was agriculture, what Temple Grandin has called "the ancient contract" (T. Grandin, personal communication).

Husbandry meant putting one's animals into the best possible environment for their biological needs and natures, and then augmenting their natural ability to flourish with protection from predation, provision of food and water during famine and drought, help in birthing, medical attention, etc. The essence of husbandry was putting square pegs into square holes, round pegs into round holes, and creating as little friction as possible in doing so.

So powerful is the husbandry image that, in fact, when the Psalmist wishes to schematize God's ideal relationship to humans, he uses the shepherd as a metaphor: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (1). We want no more from God than what the shepherd provides the sheep!

Under such conditions, productivity and welfare were inextricably bound together and good welfare was sanctioned by the most powerful of sanctions — self-interest. If the animals' natures were not met, they did not produce. If they produced, it was because their needs were met, physical and psychological. Thus, when agricultural scientists equate productivity with welfare, they are, by and large, correct vis à vis husbandry situations.

In the mid-twentieth century, husbandry was replaced by industry, and, symbolically, academic departments of animal husbandry became departments of animal science, defined as "the application of industrial methods to the production of animals." In this model, one no longer needed to keep animals happy to keep them productive. Technological "sanders," such as vaccines, antibiotics, air changing systems, and so on, allowed us to put square pegs in round holes while still assuring productivity. The historical link between productivity and welfare was severed; animals could produce while being miserable.

Consider the egg industry. If one had tried 100 years ago to raise chickens in cages, 100 000 to a building, all of the birds would have died of disease within a month. Today, however, with the help of technological fixes, birds produce, even though almost all considerations relevant to their well being are thwarted. In these operations, individual bird productivity is less than it would be for the same bird under husbandry conditions, but productivity of the operation as a whole is assured. Cramming 6 chickens into a small cage reduces productivity *per bird*, but increases productivity *per cage*; in the end, chickens are cheap and cages are expensive.

In current systems, such as confinement swine or egg production, productivity cnnot be seen as a measure of welfare, let alone as closely tied to it. Productivity is a predicate reflecting an economic measure of the operation as a whole; welfare is a description tied to individual animals.

Those who believe productivity assures welfare are thinking of the productivity of individual animals under husbandry conditions. The equation of these 2 measures makes no sense in the context of industrialized agriculture where productivity is measured in terms of the economic value of the whole system.

Bernard E. Rollin, PhD

References

1. Psalm 23:1. The Holy Bible. Authorized King James version. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972.

Ethical question of the month — February 2002

Responses to the case presented are welcome. Please limit your reply to approximately 50 words and mail along with your name and address to: **Ethical Choices, c/o Dr. Tim Blackwell, Veterinary Science, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, Wellington Place, R.R.#1, Fergus, Ontario N1M 2W3; telephone: (519) 846-3413; fax: (519) 846-8101. Suggested ethical questions of the month are also welcome! All ethical questions or scenarios in the ethics column are based on actual events, which are changed, including names, locations, species, etc., to protect the confidentiality of the parties involved.**

You are called to a home in the country to examine a dog with blood in its urine. The owners, an elderly couple, have decided to change veterinary clinics. They take you out to the barn where they have approximately 20 dogs and 15 cats in various pens, cages, and box stalls. All of the animals appear healthy and have good hair coats. When you enter the barn, most of the dogs begin to bark, rattle their cages, or jump against the stall doors. You examine the dog with the urinary problem, collect samples for laboratory testing, and provide symptomatic treatment. You learn through your conversation with the owners that they have been "rescuing" dogs and cats for years. Many of the animals they take in are unlikely to be adopted. All are well to over-fed, neutered, and receive veterinary attention when needed. Two collie crosses receive twice daily topical treatments for lick granulomas and 1 cat is tranquilized in efforts to reduce its tendency towards self-mutilation. The noise in the barn is deafening and you are anxious to leave. While driving back to the clinic, you wonder if this couple is doing a good thing or a bad thing.

Submitted by Jane McCamus, Kitchener, Ontario

Question de déontologie du mois — février 2002

Les réponses au cas présenté sont les bienvenues. Veuillez limiter votre réponse à environ 50 mots et nous la faire parvenir par la poste avec vos nom et adresse à l'adresse suivante : ***Choix déontologiques, a/s du Dr Tim Blackwell, Science vétérinaire, ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et des Affaires rurales de l'Ontario, R.R. 1, Fergus (Ontario) N1M 2W3; téléphone : (519) 846-3413; télécopieur : (519) 846-8101. Les propositions de questions déontologiques sont toujours bienvenues! Toutes les questions et situations présentées dans cette chronique s'inspirent d'événements réels dont nous modifions certains éléments, comme les noms, les endroits ou les espèces, pour protéger l'anonymat des personnes en cause.***

Vous vous rendez en consultation à la campagne pour examiner un chien dont l'urine contient du sang. Les propriétaires, un couple âgé, ont décidé de changer de clinique vétérinaire. Ils vous conduisent à la grange, où environ 20 chiens et 15 chats sont enfermés dans des cages, des enclos et des box. Tous les animaux semblent en santé et ont un beau poil. Quand vous entrez dans la grange, la plupart des chiens se mettent à aboyer, à s'agiter dans leur cage et à sauter contre la porte de leur enclos. Vous examinez le chien qui a un problème urinaire, vous recueillez des échantillons en vue d'un examen en laboratoire et vous prescrivez un traitement en fonction des symptômes. Au cours de la conversation, vous apprenez que les propriétaires « secourent » des chiens et des chats depuis des années. Beaucoup des animaux qu'ils hébergent ne seraient probablement pas adoptés. Ils sont tous bien ou trop nourris, ils ont été stérilisés et ils reçoivent des soins vétérinaires au besoin. Deux colleys croisés reçoivent un traitement topique deux fois par jour pour des granulomes de léchage, et un chat reçoit des sédatifs pour réduire sa tendance à l'automutilation. Le bruit dans la grange est assourdissant et vous avez hâte de partir. Sur le chemin du retour, vous vous demandez si le couple fait une bonne ou une mauvaise chose.

Proposé par Jane McCamus, Kitchener (Ontario)

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